SEPN
The Sustainability and Education Policy Network

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE CANADIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN INSTITUTIONAL POLICY ANALYSIS

The Challenge: As climate change becomes an increasingly pressing concern, higher education institutions must play a role in developing solutions. To address a gap in existing understandings of how institutions are responding to climate change in policy, the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) examined climate change policies from a sample of 50 Canadian institutions.

Main Findings: SEPN found that 44% of the institutions had a climate-related policy. Existing climate policies focused disproportionately on operations, missing opportunities to address climate change in governance, curriculum, research, and community outreach.

Take Action: Policy-makers, administrators, staff, and students working to improve institutional responses to climate change should develop Climate Action Plans, Sustainability Plans, and Strategic Plans that incorporate sustainability into all core areas of institutional activity. Specific policy and practice examples are provided below.

## How are Post-secondary Institutions in Canada Engaging with Climate Change in Policy?

SEPN analyzed the content of climate change policies, sustainability policies, and strategic plans from a representative sample of 50 Canadian universities, colleges, and collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEPs) in five domains pertaining to sustainability: **(1) governance, (2) curriculum, (3) operations, (4) research, and (5) community outreach.**

Climate Change in Institutional Policies: By The Numbers

A total of 22 institutions (44%) had **climate-specific policies.** Of those, 11 were official climate change policies (typically called Climate Action Plans) and 11 addressed climate change via broader energy consumption or emissions plans. A total of 63% of the institutions with a climate-focused policy were members of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE).

Forty institutions (80%) had a **Sustainability Plan** or policy. While 26 of the Sustainability Plans mentioned emissions or climate change, 3 plans (7.5%) explicitly discussed climate change as being a catalyst for institutional sustainability action.

Only 15 institutions (30%) used the term "climate change" in their **Strategic Plans.**

50 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

22 CLIMATE-SPECIFIC POLICIES
- 11 Climate Action Plans
- 11 Energy Consumption/ Emissions Plans

50 STRATEGIC PLANS
- 15 referred to Climate Change

40 SUSTAINABILITY PLANS
- 26 mentioned Emissions or Climate Change
- 3 referenced Climate Change as Catalyst for Action
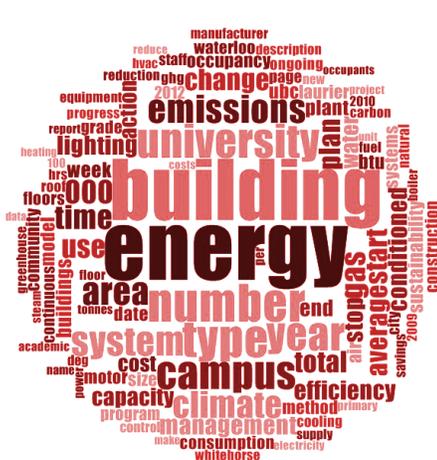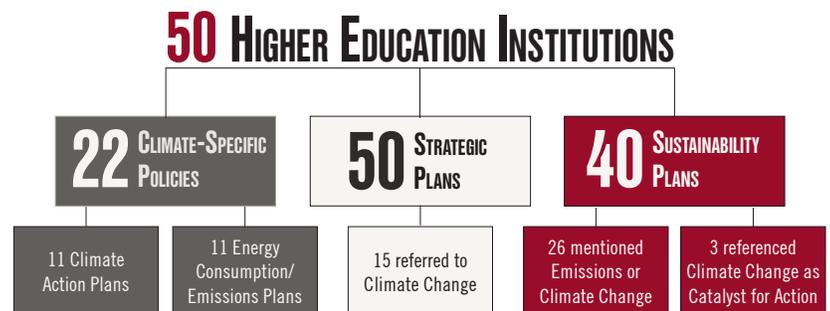
Leveraging Campus Infrastructure: A Disproportionate Focus on Operations

- Climate-specific policies most often discussed climate change in relation to campus **operations**, frequently via improving efficiency in transportation and infrastructure, including a focus on lowering costs through efficiencies.
  - This focus on operations was seen in all policy documents, but was most evident in Climate Action Plans and emissions policies.
  - Climate policies' most frequently referenced words were "energy" and "building."
- In **governance**, 30% of the institutions referred to climate change in their Strategic Plans.
- Educational programming typically focused on changing the energy consumption behaviours of staff and students, not on increasing climate change- or sustainability-focused **curriculum** offerings.
- **Research** was not a major theme in climate policy documents.
- A lack of collaborative **community outreach** was seen across policy documents. When discussed, it typically involved one-way knowledge transfer to off-campus communities.

Policy and Practice Examples from Canadian Higher Education Institutions

Despite the considerable challenges of cultural inertia and political resistance, a number of institutions in Canada have developed more sophisticated policies that go beyond reducing carbon consumption and emissions and engage more holistically with climate change.

Domain	Sustainability Approaches	Policy Examples
Governance	• Sign sustainability declarations such as Talloires & Halifax Declarations • Develop planning bodies to assess emissions and consumption • Create Sustainability Policy and/or Climate Action Plan • Integrate sustainability in Strategic Plans	Queen's University (2010) Sustainability Strategic Framework Red River College Royal Roads University
Curriculum	• Develop programs to modify staff and student energy consumption behaviours • Inventory climate change-related courses, programs, and research • Develop climate action courses and immersive experiences • Integrate climate change into existing curriculum	University of Ottawa (2004) Action Plan for Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions Annual Progress Report University of Saskatchewan (2012) Climate Action Plan
Research	• Encourage research focused on natural sciences or technological solutions • Foster social sciences and humanities research to address social, cultural, and political solutions • Develop interdisciplinary research units	University of Calgary (2010) Greenhouse Gas Emission Reduction Plan
Community Outreach	• Disseminate best practices and research findings to stakeholders • Partner with stakeholders outside of higher education institutions	University of Saskatchewan (2012) Climate Action Plan
Operations	• Retrofit existing buildings with more efficient technologies & incorporate sustainable design in new construction (e.g., LEED) • Improve transportation systems • Identify GHG emission sources • Conduct feasibility studies & demonstration projects • Procure renewable and sustainable energy sources	University of British Columbia (2006) Sustainability Plan Dalhousie University (2010) Climate Change Plan Simon Fraser University (2011) Carbon Neutral Action Report

Take Action

Climate change is a complex phenomenon that requires holistic responses if we are to overcome the significant challenges it presents. Higher education institutions seeking to address climate change in their policies should:

Recommendation #1: Create a Climate Change Policy

✘ **Challenge:** SEPN found that while a number of institutions across Canada were broadly addressing climate change at a policy level, there remains significant capacity for improvement.

✓ **Action:** As many institutions in the study did not have policies to respond to climate change, SEPN's research suggests many institutions will need to develop responses to climate change via Climate Action Plans, Sustainability Plans, and Strategic Plans.

Recommendation #2: Move Beyond Operations: Adopt a Whole Institution Sustainability Approach

✘ **Challenge:** The institutions in SEPN's sample that did have climate change plans exhibited underdeveloped responses and climate change responses were particularly lacking in research and curriculum focus.

✓ **Action:** Policy-makers, administrators, staff, and students working to improve climate action in their post-secondary institutions should integrate sustainability across all aspects of institutional activity—governance, curriculum, research, community outreach, and operations—so that sustainability becomes a core property of institutional activity.

RESEARCH. CONNECT. MOBILIZE.

Learn more about us at www.sepn.ca